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# Pictures from the Past: The First University of Dallas

By

STAFFORD POOLE, C.M.<sup>1</sup>



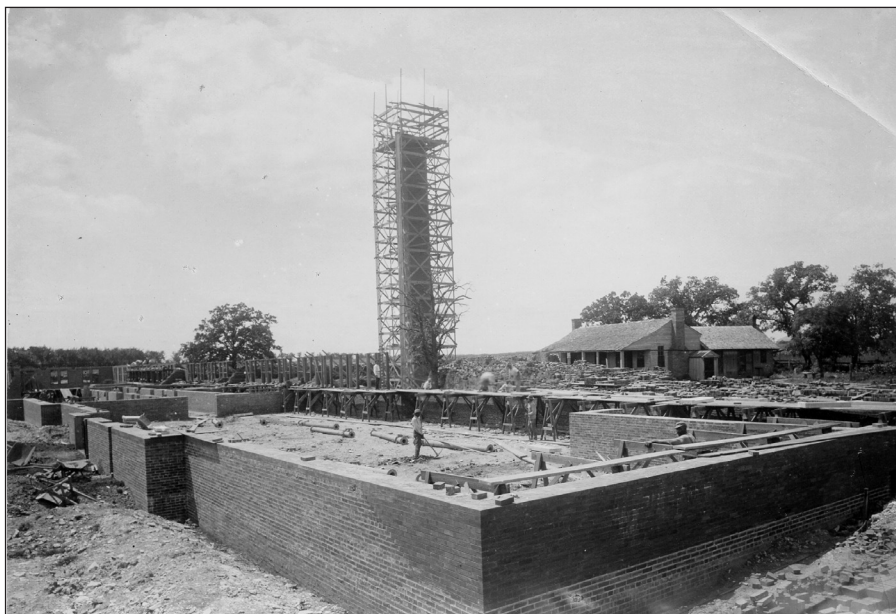
Facing view of the University of Dallas.

*Courtesy of DeAndreis-Rosati Memorial Archives, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, IL*

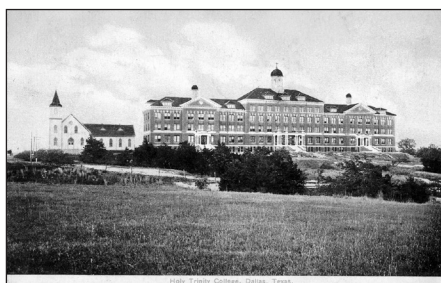
Of all the institutions of higher learning inaugurated and conducted by the Vincentian Community, none has a more appalling or tragic history than the University of Dallas.

Like so many of the others, it was undertaken at the request of the ordinary, in this case Edward Dunne (1848-1910), the second bishop of Dallas. Having known the work of the Vincentians when he was a diocesan priest in Chicago, he was eager to have them in his diocese. His offer of a college and parish was accepted first by Father Thomas Smith and then by Father William Barnwell on behalf of the Western Province in 1905. A short time later twenty-four acres of wooded land were purchased in the north of the city for \$20,000.

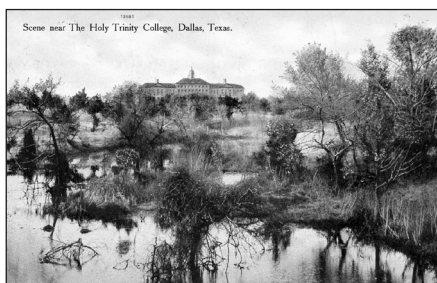
<sup>1</sup> The following is an excerpt from *The American Vincentians: A Popular History of the Congregation of the Mission in the United States, 1815-1987*, ed. John E. Rybolt, C.M. (Brooklyn, N.Y.: New City Press, 1988), pp. 329-338. The book is available for purchase online at <http://vsi.depaul.edu>, click on Printed Resources, then Bookstore; or inquire by phone at 312-362-7139.



The construction of Holy Trinity College — later named the University of Dallas.  
*Courtesy DeAndreis-Rosati Memorial Archives, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, IL*



Postcard. Holy Trinity College  
 (Holy Trinity Catholic Church at left).  
 Printed by Grombach-Faisans Co.,  
 New Orleans, LA, circa 1908.



Postcard. Scene near the Holy Trinity College,  
 Dallas, TX. Circa 1909.

*Images courtesy of Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, IL*

Barnwell and the provincial council were determined that the Vincentian entry into the new venture would be a cautious one. It was decided that \$40,000 would be raised by loans from the houses of the provinces, another \$40,000 in a fund-raising campaign, and a final \$20,000 would be borrowed on the land and furnishings of the college. At least one house, Saint Stephen's in New Orleans, refused to make the loan.

Father Patrick Finney was appointed the first superior and president. One of four brothers who were priests in the Congregation of the Mission, he was a man of boundless, and sometimes variable, enthusiasms but lacked a good managerial style. His theoretical grasp of financial practice was good, his execution was not. After his arrival in Dallas, he was told by a group of local businessmen that the plans for the school were entirely too small and that they would raise \$25,000, a promise that was never kept. Finney accepted this at face value and committed the province to pay the \$100,000 for building a school twice the size of what was originally planned. Barnwell was aghast and rebuked Finney sharply. Two months later Barnwell died.

His successor was Father Thomas Finney, Patrick Finney's older brother. This proved disastrous because it removed whatever restraint there was on Patrick Finney. For the next eleven years he was a free agent, with the result that both the college and the province were caught in an ever mounting spiral of debt. In order to finance the construction of the college building, Patrick Finney entered into a complex agreement with a Chicago-based insurance company (which had also lent money to DePaul University). The deal ran into trouble almost immediately when the insurer tried to change the terms of the agreement, failed to forward payments, and finally went out of business altogether. Before doing so, it sold Finney's debts to a number of banks.

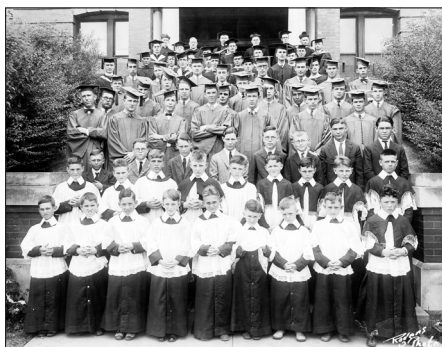
At Dunne's suggestion, the new school was called Holy Trinity College, and it opened in September 1907. It was housed in a magnificent building four stories high and with a southern façade of 370 feet. It was at first only a high school, with an opening enrollment of eighty-eight which rose to 160 by 1910. During its first years the college was beset by numerous problems, including a recession, a drought, and an outbreak of illness. American entrance into World War I hurt it still more by draining off students and faculty.



Priests at the back entrance to the University of Dallas, dated May 1918.

Pictured are, bottom row:

Charles McCarthy, Thomas Powers, Thomas Levan, Walter Quinn; middle row: Manuel de Françaises, Richard Delonly, Walter Case; top row: Edward Fuller, Peter Finnly, Thomas Reynolds, John Le Doge.



Classes at the University of Dallas, no date.



University of Dallas pennant, includes official seal.

*Images courtesy of DeAndreis-Rosati Memorial Archives,  
DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, IL*



The worst blow was the death of Bishop Dunne in 1910. His successor was Joseph Lynch, the first Episcopal alumnus of Kenrick Seminary in Saint Louis, who was bishop from 1911 to 1954. Whereas Dunne had been an active supporter of the college, Lynch was indifferent to it. He offered little or no support, would not help it in its financial difficulties but insisted on holding the Vincentians to the letter of their contract with the diocese.

Supposedly it was at the suggestion of Bishop Dunne that the name of the school was changed to the University of Dallas in 1910 in order to prevent that name from being appropriated by a group of non-Catholics. In theory this meant that it could now offer collegiate courses in the proper sense. By 1915 three primary grades had been added for the sake of students from rural areas, and there was a smattering of students on the junior college level. In 1916 the university granted an M.A. and in 1917 an unearned Ph.D. degree to its vice president, Father Marshall Winne.

One of the principal problems was Patrick Finney's disorganized administration. He was absent from the university for long periods, insisted on doing all important things himself, and kept poor records. Worst of all, however, was the debt. The deficit for the year 1909 was \$30,000, and the total debt, insofar as it was known, was \$296,056. No financial records exist from the Finney years, perhaps because his personal papers were destroyed by his brothers after his death. One of Finney's schemes for making money, turning the college laundry into a commercial one, backfired and cost the college more money than it made. Another scheme, purchasing and developing a tract of land called Loma Linda, was sound in theory but, as will be seen later, failed in practice.

In 1917 Patrick Finney suffered a breakdown and was hospitalized for almost a year. Father Marshall Winne, the vice president, took over the day-to-day operation of the university. Because there had already been hints of trouble, the provincial council named Father Thomas Levan as president pro tem (while at the same time he remained superior of Saint Vincent's College in Cape Girardeau) and sent him to Dallas to investigate the situation.

Levan's report was a shock to the council and, apparently, to the provincial. The University of Dallas had a debt of over \$700,000 and a yearly deficit of \$25,000 to \$30,000. The council sent Levan to inform Bishop Lynch of the situation and seek his help. Both the bishop, and later his consulters, rebuffed the Vincentians. Levan recommended to the council that the university be closed and its assets sold to satisfy its creditors. This was rejected both by the council and by Bishop Lynch, who insisted that the Vincentians fulfill the contract under which they had come to Dallas.

With the province on the brink of bankruptcy, Charles Souvay wrote to the superior general in Paris, that the provincial and his council had known nothing of the Dallas debt. "It was, then, from top to bottom a reign of an inconceivable incoherence." He concluded:

The Visitor [provincial] does not seem to realize that his brother was of such inconceivable disorder and extravagance in his administration; that he is, materially, gravely responsible for the disaster of that house and directly of the province. I dare say that his sickness has been providential. Otherwise we would most likely still be in ignorance of the precipice that he has dug under our feet. And I would dare to add that the most efficacious measures should be taken to make sure that M. Patrick Finney, if he lives a hundred years, will never again be appointed a superior.<sup>2</sup>

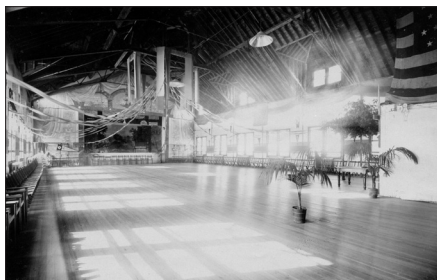
As acting president of Dallas, Levan struggled to find some way to extricate the university from its debts. Unknown to him, Thomas Finney and the council were planning to appoint him permanent president of the university in the hope that, once faced with the accomplished fact, he would accept the position. Word leaked out, however, and Levan loudly opposed the plan. As Thomas Finney admitted, "it was to demand heroism."<sup>3</sup> The mantle of heroism was thereupon given to Father Marshall Winne (October 1918). Both the university and the province were given a reprieve in the form of a \$200,000 loan from the Daughters of Charity.

Father Winne's term of office (1918-1922) was difficult and frustrating. A long-anticipated fund drive was undertaken. Bishop Lynch refused to write a supporting letter until a committee of laypersons, including some influential protestants, persuaded him to do so. His letter (9 February 1919) was notable for its lack of enthusiasm. Many of the diocesan clergy were actively hostile to the drive. It was an overall failure. In 1920 the primary school grades were discontinued. Efforts to draw more students by means of scholarships simply lowered the income available from tuition.

One of Winne's crosses was the university's treasurer, Father Hugh O'Connor. O'Connor was constantly dabbling in various schemes to rescue the university, including a fund-raising campaign in the diocese of Galveston that he undertook without the bishop's permission. Worse still

<sup>2</sup> Souvay to Verdier, 28 May 1918, Microfilm of American materials (to 1935) in the Archives of the General Curia, Rome: series D, roll 2.

<sup>3</sup> Finney to Verdier, 1 April 1918, DeAndreis-Rosati Memorial Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, IL (DRMA), Finney papers.



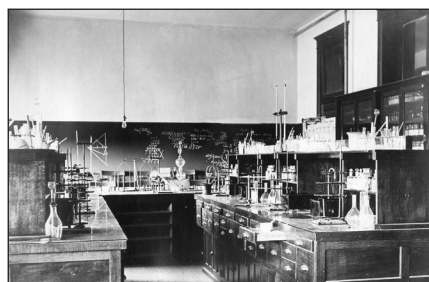
The auditorium and dance hall.



Students pose at dining table.



The dormitory.



The chemical lab.

*Images courtesy of DeAndreis-Rosati Memorial Archives,  
DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, IL*

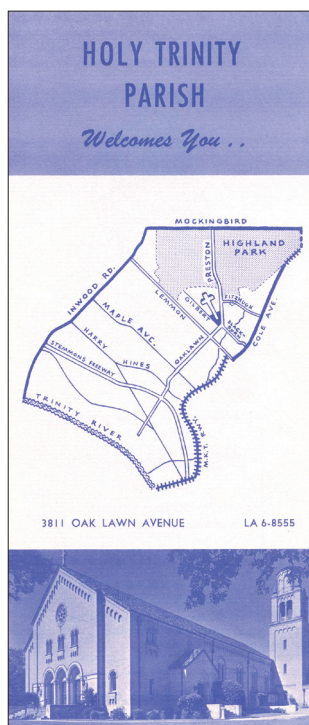




Postcard. Holy Trinity College.  
Printed by The Albotype Co., Brooklyn, New York.  
Handwritten note at bottom reads:

"RC thinks this is the only school on earth."

*Courtesy of Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, IL*



At left, parish brochure (mid-twentieth century) including map of grounds which housed the University of Dallas. At right, a homecoming program for the University of Dallas, undated.

*Courtesy of DeAndreis-Rosati Memorial Archives, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, IL*

was his involvement with a shady oilman named J.J. O'Malley. In February 1922 O'Connor sent out letters of solicitation, inviting people to invest in O'Malley's drilling activities, with the university receiving one-fourth of the profits. O'Connor's letter quoted a number of prominent Dallas businessmen in support of the venture. Unfortunately these endorsements were either false or exaggerated. O'Malley was eventually arrested for mail fraud, and the university suffered a great deal of embarrassment. Winne wrote to Thomas Finney, "I am absolutely discouraged and disgusted."<sup>4</sup> Winne was relieved of his office in June 1922, and O'Connor was transferred to Chicago to become a fund raiser for DePaul University.

After two other candidates had turned down the office, Father William Barr was appointed president. He served for only one year. The reasons for the brevity of this appointment are not known. In August 1923 Father Thomas Powers was named to succeed him. He set out to reinvigorate the university, especially by introducing coeducation. This project failed, probably because of opposition by Bishop Lynch. Powers also secured a "Class A" rating for the university from the Association of Texas Colleges. While it brought prestige, it also required that a minimum enrollment be maintained and that college and high school faculties be kept separate. This, in turn, demanded more financial outlay.

Powers lasted only two years. In 1925 he was removed for reasons that are not now clear. Thomas Finney gave a number of excuses, none of which was entirely convincing. In September 1925 the provincial and his council appointed Father Walter Quinn as president but two months later named him director of novices at Saint Mary's Seminary in Perryville, Missouri. Father Thomas Carney succeeded him. The University of Dallas thus had the dubious distinction of having had three presidents within one year, a fact that was not lost on Bishop Lynch or the people of Dallas.

Carney was young, thirty-three, and talented but also of a sensitive and moody nature. The university was to be a calamitous experience for him, in part because Patrick Finney returned to Dallas in order to salvage it. In 1908 Finney had purchased some choice property, later called Loma Linda, which he now proposed to develop. In 1924 and 1925 he secured his brother's permission to proceed with the development himself. Barr, then the superior at the Barrens, heard about this and sent letters to the provincial consultors, begging them to rein in Finney and stop the project. His efforts failed. Finney again acted as an independent agent and was able to speak for the university without being attached to it. He formed a group of advisors and investors and within a short time the first tract, called Section I, was

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<sup>4</sup> Winne to Finney, 22 March 1922, DRMA, Finney papers.

completed and incorporated as part of the suburb called University Park. Almost immediately the bottom fell out of the Dallas real estate market, with values declining by 13 to 30 percent. Within a year the Loma Linda project had a debt of \$465,430.

Carney chafed under a situation he could not control. It changed dramatically in March 1926 when Thomas Finney resigned as provincial and, after Michael Ryan's refusal of the post, Barr succeeded him. Carney took advantage of the change of administration to assert his authority over Loma Linda and to remove Patrick Finney. The two had a loud confrontation at the university, but Carney prevailed. Carney then was able to persuade Edward Doheny of Los Angeles (whom Carney had known when he was an assistant at Saint Vincent's parish) to pay the interest on the university's debt. In 1926 he eliminated the senior college program, the boarding students, and the athletic program.

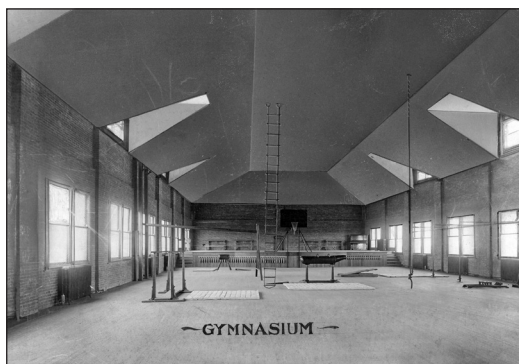
In March 1927 as the banks began to close in on the university, Carney suffered a nervous breakdown. Barr, Levan, and the provincial council again turned to Doheny who assumed the university's debt on which he would hold bonds for ten years. It was not a donation because the province was obliged to repay him at the end of that period. Shortly thereafter the province was able to sell the remaining Loma Linda property, and the university's debts had been temporarily settled.

All of this was too late to help Carney. Barr was hostile to Carney, whose appointment he had opposed, and was insensitive to the young man's sufferings. In July 1927 he summarily removed him as president. Carney was shocked, and when he hinted that he might appeal to the superior general, Barr forestalled him by writing a generic letter of denunciation filled with vague charges and innuendos. In August Carney asked for his release from the Community and after being forced to wait for several months, was granted it. He entered the diocese of Galveston where he became a pastor and monsignor and gained a nationwide reputation as a speaker on radio's Catholic Hour. He died in Texas on 1 November 1950. The whole procedure reflects little credit on Barr.

The next, and last, president of the University of Dallas was Father Charles McCarthy. The college department was now completely eliminated, and only the high school remained. In May 1928 Barr and his council determined to close even that and extricate the province from its last involvement with the university. He informed Lynch of the decision but received no answer. A second letter conveyed again the decision not to reopen the high school in September 1929. Lynch then began a strange, last ditch campaign to save the high school, but it was too little and too late. In a letter bristling with indignation, Barr announced the final withdrawal



The woodshop.



The gymnasium.



A student's room.

*Images courtesy of DeAndreis-Rosati Memorial Archives,  
DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, IL*

but emphasized that the Vincentians would retain the parish (the present Holy Trinity), which they owned outright. On 1 February 1929 the provincial council reiterated that the province would under no circumstances consider reopening the college.

Still the matter was not ended. At the end of 1928 Barr had to deal with an anonymous denunciation to Rome of the Vincentians and their work in Dallas. It almost certainly seems to have been the work of Bishop Lynch. Barr responded with a strong and lengthy statement, and nothing was heard of the denunciations again, perhaps because the demise of the university was by then an accomplished fact.

The bad management of the University of Dallas continued to the end in the disposition of the property. After some other offers for the land and building had fallen through, Lynch offered to assume the current debt of \$157,000 and take the land. The offer was accepted, and on 27 May 1929 McCarthy signed a formal transfer to Lynch with a restrictive covenant that it could be used for white people only. What McCarthy omitted or forgot to tell Lynch was that he had let out an option to some other buyers, who now sued to gain control of the property. Lynch demanded and obtained from the province security against possible loss. The courts awarded the land to the second group of buyers on condition that they raise sufficient money to pay for it. When they failed to do so, it reverted to Lynch.

The bishop had intended to use the building for a diocesan high school, but in 1930 a girls' orphanage moved into the building. In 1941 the Jesuits opened a high school and three years later purchased the property from Lynch for about the same amount that he paid for it. In 1963 they sold it for a handsome profit and used the money to build a new high school elsewhere. Within two years the original building had been torn down. The Western Province vacated the title University of Dallas in 1954 and the present institution of that name has no organic connection with the one directed by the Vincentians.

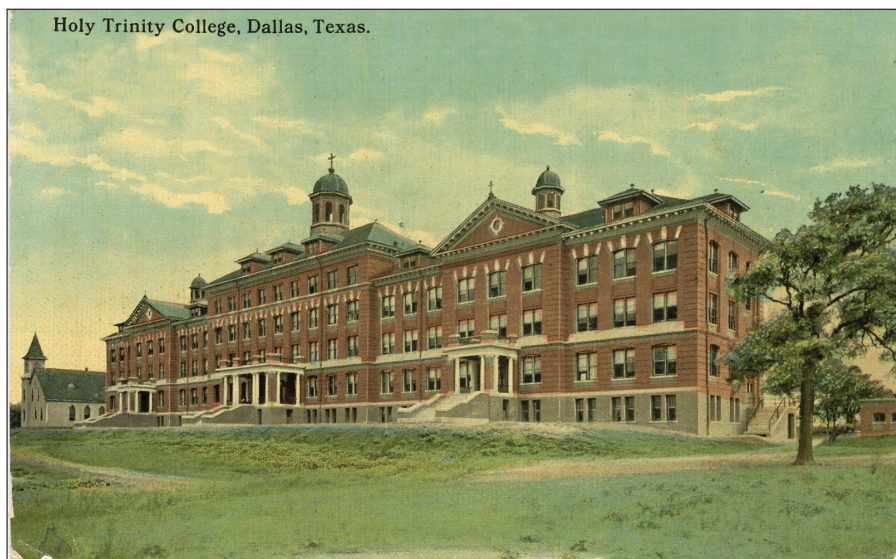
In retrospect it can be seen that the University of Dallas was doomed to failure from the beginning. There were not enough local resources to support a college, much less a university. In 1905 Dallas was a small city with a small Catholic population. The project was launched on an extravagant scale and on the basis of a misunderstanding about the province's financial responsibility. Patrick Finney had many winning qualities, especially in the field of public relations, but he was not suited to be the chief executive officer of an academic institution. The top level of administration was characterized by great instability: between 1917 and 1929 there were six different presidents. Once the province had been committed to the university,





Students assembled in the dining room.

*Courtesy of DeAndreis-Rosati Memorial Archives, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, IL*



Holy Trinity College, Dallas, Texas.

Postcard. Holy Trinity College. Printed by S.H. Kress & Co., postmarked 1917.  
*Courtesy of Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, IL*



there was great reluctance to admit failure and withdraw. The unhappy coincidence that the two Finney brothers were president and provincial was damaging to both the university and the province and made any admission of failure highly unlikely.

Extrinsic factors, such as recessions, drought, epidemics, and the collapse of the real estate market worsened an already bad situation. The hostile, or at best indifferent, attitude of Bishop Lynch was another negative factor. His reluctance to become financially involved in such a venture was quite understandable. His insistence on holding the province to the letter of the contract was not.

The University of Dallas was a classic example of throwing good money after bad. Unfortunately, in its descent it almost carried the province with it. This was clear to many, such as Levan, who strongly advised severing the Community's involvement with it. In 1918 one of his confreres wrote to him that attempts to maintain the university were "throwing money at the birds. There is no power on earth that can make the University of Dallas succeed and I do not see the sense of going deeper into debt."<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately such advice was not heeded, and the province skirted the edge of disaster.



University of Dallas bronze plaque with official seal.

*Courtesy of DeAndreis-Rosati Memorial Archives, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, IL*

<sup>5</sup> Martin Hanley to Levan, 4 February 1918, DRMA, University of Dallas papers.